

Statement of Congressman Steve King (IA-04)
House Veterans' Affairs Committee Member Day Hearing
On behalf of H.R. 2994, the Restoring Maximum Mobility to
Our Nation's Veterans Act of 2019
Before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
September 09, 2019

Good Morning Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe, and Members of the Committee. I am truly honored to speak before you today in support of my bill, H.R. 2994, the Restoring Maximum Mobility to Our Nation's Veterans Act of 2019. This critical legislation aims to ensure that our nation's veterans with service-connected disabilities are not simply afforded a wheelchair, but are equipped with the very best wheelchair—one that affords maximum achievable mobility and function in the activities of daily life.

The ability to pursue life to the fullest possible degree, even in the face of disability, is critical to ensuring that our nation's veterans are as healthy as possible—in body, mind, emotions and spirit. And the statistics prove the truth of that statement. Statistics demonstrate that an average of 20 veterans die by suicide each day in our nation. Six of each 20 are recent users of Veterans Health Administration (VHA) services in the two preceding years leading up to the tragic decision to commit suicide. In my home state of Iowa, there were 75 veteran suicides in 2014 alone. We mourn these precious lives that were lost unnecessarily and find it unthinkable that these trends should continue. We must do more, and we must provide better services, care and support that our nation's veterans need and deserve.

According to current practice, when determining which wheelchair is best equipped for a particular veteran, a VA clinician will take into account medical diagnoses, prognosis, functional abilities, limitations, goals, and ambitions. Evaluation of mobility assesses musculoskeletal, neuromuscular, pulmonary, and cardiovascular capacities and response, effort, quality and speed of mobility, and overall function. However, the VHA recommendations clarify that "Motorized and power equipment or equipment for personal mobility intended solely for a recreational leisure activity should not be provided...Motorized and power equipment designed for recreational leisure activities do not typically support a rehabilitative goal."

In view of suicide rates among our nation's veterans, how can motorized and power equipment designed for recreational leisure activities not support a rehabilitative goal? According to a study made available by the National Center for Biotechnology Information, which operates under the National Institutes of Health (NIH), "...leisure activities are defined as preferred and enjoyable activities

participated in during one's free time, and characterized as representing freedom and providing intrinsic satisfaction. Individuals can recover from stress; restore social and physical resources through leisure activities. Leisure activities with others may provide social support and, in turn, mediate the stress-health relationship, enrich meaning of life, recovery from stress, and restoration of social and physical resources..."

This description will sound accurate to anyone who has found rest, solace and rejuvenation in a preferred recreational activity. As someone who enjoys the outdoors, hunting, fishing and travel, I certainly can appreciate the importance of recreation to a healthy life. And as this reality affects our nation's disabled veterans, I have seen first-hand the benefit of recreation to their health. I have had the honor of hunting with my friend, Army Specialist Jack Zimmerman. Jack is a remarkable man and decorated veteran who lost both of his legs as a result of life-altering injuries caused by an improvised explosive device. After his injury, Jack had a long rehabilitation in front him. And he had to deal with trials that he simply should not have had to during that time, including the VA issuing multiple inadequate wheelchairs to him. As an outdoorsman, Jack needed a chair that could navigate uneven terrain without the risk of tipping over. Jack was made aware of an off-road powered-track wheelchair that could offer a heightened level of normalcy and enjoyment to his life. He contacted the VA to acquire one and waited months without success.

Jack's wife ultimately was able to procure a powered-track wheelchair from an outside organization called the Independence Fund, which provides resources and tools that enable veterans to work through their physical, mental and emotional wounds and regain their independence. I am grateful for the Independence Fund and other organizations that make it their mission to provide for our veterans. But our veterans should not have to rely on such groups to do for them what their nation should. They fought for this nation and they should be cared for by this nation.

In the aftermath of Iraq and Afghanistan, we have strived in Congress to halt veteran suicide. We have worked to ensure that every veteran has access to the health care and services they need. Sadly, the somber statistics demonstrate that we have far to go to adequately take care of our veterans. That's why I champion H.R.

2994, which amends Section 1701 of Title 38 of the United States Code to ensure wheelchairs provided to our veterans include “enhanced power wheelchairs, multi-environmental wheelchairs, track wheelchairs, stair-climbing wheelchairs, and other power-driven mobility devices.” This legislation ensures that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs may provide a wheelchair to a veteran because the wheelchair restores an ability that relates exclusively to participation in a recreational activity.